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Text:

UNCLAS SENSITIVE NICOSIA 00898

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CHARGE: PROG

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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY NICOSIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8313
INFO RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1007
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NICOSIA 000898

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV PREL CY
SUBJECT: ANNAN PLAN STILL DOMINATING ELECTION CAMPAIGN

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Incumbent Tassos Papadopoulos's continuing lead in the presidential race is forcing his opponents to attempt to deconstruct the hero image that the President has forged with his hard-line Cyprus Problem tactics. AKEL leader Dimitris Christofias, for example, has abandoned his relatively moderate criticism of Papadopoulos and instead unleashed an angry attack on his former coalition partner, publicly disparaging the President's political judgment and revealing their earlier policy disagreements. As usual, the 2004 Annan Plan reunification effort has taken center-stage, with Christofias accusing Papadopoulos of mishandling UN-brokered preparatory talks in Switzerland, closing the doors to a solution with his infamous April 2004 national address, and refusing since to specify substantive settlement demands of the Greek Cypriot side. The Papadopoulos camp retorts that AKEL had supported the President's every move, however, and has neither room nor reason to criticize. As a result of this backwards-looking debate, real issues that affect Cypriots' future are receiving little attention this campaign season. End Summary.

PAPADOPOULOS' RESILIENCE HEATS UP THE CAMPAIGN

¶12. (U) September and October have disappointed Papadopoulos's two major opponents, who were confident that the President's summer doldrums and then-declining popularity would carry into autumn. A recent opinion poll commissioned by leading daily "Phileleftheros" showed Papadopoulos increasing his lead to five points over second-place Christofias and nearly nine over DISY-supported Ioannis Kasoulides. Even more disturbing for the challengers, nearly half of those sampled believe Papadopoulos will be re-elected, compared to 35 percent in July. The same poll contained one optimistic note for Christofias, however, giving him a small lead over the President, were the two to face off in a run-off.

¶13. (SBU) Such numbers have forced the campaign teams and the parties backing Christofias and Kasoulides to roll up their sleeves

and sharpen their claws. Unable to shift the debate to the future and away from the Annan Plan, Christofias changed tack, deciding to call into question Papadopoulos's handling of the Cyprus issue. He has focused on the period prior to the submission of the last version of the Annan Plan, which occurred on March 30, 2004.

REVISITING THE ANNAN PLAN TALKS

¶4. (U) Papadopoulos actually started the fight with an October 29 statement accusing his opponents of exhibiting poor political judgment in the run-up to the 2004 referendum. It drew an angry response from Christofias that re-opened public debate and dominated the front pages for days. The AKEL candidate countered that Papadopoulos himself had failed to negotiate changes to the Annan draft beneficial to G/Cs. In the final stage of the negotiations in Burgenstock, Christofias continued, Papadopoulos had ignored his pleas to delineate the G/C "red lines." Instead of the concise document the United Nations had sought from the sides, the lawyerly Papadopoulos presented a 44-page opus that had angered all involved, Christofias asserted. For three years thereafter the President continued to refuse AKEL's requests that he present clear negotiating positions to the UN.

¶5. (U) Christofias next charged that Papadopoulos should not have consented to staging a referendum on a plan that he had considered unacceptable. "If Papadopoulos was indeed the only leader with sound political judgment and the courage to say 'no,' he should have assumed his responsibility as a leader and refused to put to a referendum a plan he considered unacceptable," he asserted. Christofias recounted that AKEL's congress in April 2004 had recommended postponing the referenda, a position the President opposed.

¶6. (U) In a lengthy interview to opposition "Politis" on November 4 and 5, Christofias revealed many of the disagreements that AKEL had kept under wraps in the past four-and-a-half years. From the outset, he had encouraged Papadopoulos to forge closer relations with British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other important international leaders in order to advance national interests, but the President had rejected his recommendations. Referring to Papadopoulos's famous April 2004 speech calling on Greek Cypriots to oppose the "partitionist" Annan Plan, Christofias implied that the President's hyperbole had destroyed future prospects for a Cyprus solution. Despite the complaints, however, Christofias insisted that AKEL's 2003 decision to support Papadopoulos was not a mistake at the time.

¶7. (U) Naturally, Papadopoulos defended his Cyprus Problem policies and rejected Christofias's criticisms. The President recalled his "secret" meetings with Turkish Cypriot politician Serdar Denktash, in Christofias's presence, during which he had tried to push for postponement of the referenda. Both Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot leadership rejected his request, however. Papadopoulos also claimed that, in Burgenstock, he had given the UN a two-page document with the requested "red lines."

COMMENT

¶8. (SBU) The President's "defiant" stance against the international community's "attempt to impose an unjust and unbalanced" solution with the Annan Plan appeals to many Greek Cypriots across the political spectrum. It has created a base of support that includes not only the parties officially sponsoring Papadopoulos's candidacy, but some AKEL and DISY faithful as well. Should he steamroll to a second term, the win could greatly reduce the influence of Cyprus's two major political parties; in response, both will attempt to tarnish Papadopoulos's "hero" image to get back their supporters. Short-term, this means a presidential campaign that leaves aside serious issues -- rising energy prices, trouble-plagued agricultural and tourism sectors, and a potentially catastrophic drought beg for candidates' attention -- to focus instead on "he said, she said" histrionics over the long-dead Annan Plan.